



# FEMA

## Horses Find Safe Haven State Fairgrounds

**Tampa, FL** - Tampa entrepreneur Bob Thomas, with the help of his friend Olin Mott, was determined to create the world's greatest horse show facility. His vision, persistence, and dedication helped create what would become the Bob Thomas Equestrian Center, a world-class venue for horse shows.

The Center, operated by the Florida State Fair Authority under the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, occupies a large portion of the 317-acre State Fairgrounds in Tampa. Well known by those who are equestrian smart, it is one of the world's leading horse show grounds. The weeklong Winter Equestrian Festival held there offers more than \$3 million in prize money. Events of 4 days provide as much as a \$2 million boost to the local and State economies.

A study conducted by the University of South Florida in fiscal year 2000, estimates annual spending by Fair Authority, employees, event sponsors, and fairground visitors generates more than \$76 million for Hillsborough County.

With the approach of Hurricane Charley, the Center received many inquiries from people searching for a place to shelter their horses. As a result the Center found a new role: safe haven for horses under threat of severe weather.

Previously, the county humane society used the horse barns to shelter trucks and other equipment when storms threatened. The manager, Butch Carse, had equipment moved to the show arena, and opened the Center's 471 reinforced concrete, 10 feet by 10 feet stalls, as a safe haven for horses. Valuable equines and family "pet horses" soon began to arrive with their grateful owners. Days before Hurricane Charley (2004) struck, the Center was filled to capacity.

Except for a \$15 clean-up fee, there were no charges for the stalls. One horse, known to be skittish, was permitted to share his stall with a favorite companion, a goat. That chemistry didn't work in the 2003 movie *Seabiscuit*, but, in this case, the goat's presence was a tranquilizing influence as storm winds swept across the fairgrounds.

Money cannot measure the affection existing between an owner and a horse. It is unique. An immeasurable loss had been avoided because the shelter was "hardened" to protect the horses. They all came through the storm without a scratch. Only an unsecured, roll-up barn door received damage.

The Equestrian Center at the Florida State Fairgrounds was financed by donations to the Florida State Fair Horse Show Association. In 1977, the Association constructed the barns, rings, tower and pavilion at a cost of approximately \$1,750,000. The Association donated the buildings to the Florida State Fair Authority in 1989 to operate as the Bob Thomas Equestrian Center. No public money was used in the construction or operation of the Center.

As business grows, plans are to construct an additional 300 hurricane-proof stalls for show activity and to protect a larger number of horses from natural disasters.



Hillsborough County,  
Florida



### Quick Facts

Sector:

**Private**

Cost:

**\$1,750,000.00 (Estimated)**

Primary Activity/Project:

**Retrofitting, Structural**

Primary Funding:

**Private funds**